

A Source of Life: "Blue. Far"

In both *The Tree of Life* and *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick presents different forms of a question demanded by humans day to day: "What are we to You? Answer me" (Mrs. O'Brien, *Tree*), "Does our ruin benefit the earth? Does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine? Is this darkness in You, too?" (Witt, *Thin*). In each film, Malick provides an experience, allowing the audience to decipher its interpretation based on their own belief system. At the same time, he beyond beautifully uses scenes of nature to show both its beauty and its cruelty, juxtaposing actions and results of humans within that nature: "Nature appears as an impassive and constant presence that frames human conflict" (Critchley). Within the nature Malick presents, he puts emphasis on the basic elements combined with a powerful use of voice-overs, stream of consciousness filming, and overwhelming-with-beauty scenes of nature to contribute to revealing and unforgettable interpretations of the mind. Two minds the audience comes to know slightly better than any other character in each film is Jack's (Sean Penn) in *The Tree of Life* and Private Witt's (Jim Caviezel) in *The Thin Red Line*. Each man has been led to a spirituality of sorts at different points in their lives – Jack clearly through his mother and Witt through his time in the Melanesian village. Watching each of the films and learning pieces of each man's past allows Malick's viewer to see the trial and tribulations Jack and Private Witt have encountered. As Malick displays each man's struggle in this world, he guides them back to spirituality with one source of life, one basic element he often lingers on with "power that at times completely overshadows the human drama" (Critchley): water. In both *The Tree of Life* and *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick uses water, such a central, yet often disregarded source, to guide his lost characters – Jack and Private Witt – back to a spiritual life, even suggesting an eternity.

In the opening scene of *The Tree of Life*, Malick displays a passage from the Bible: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4), immediately informing his viewers this film is a representation of humans’ position vs. God’s presence in this world; in particular, he displays this representation through a casually powerful use of water. From the onset, it is necessary to acknowledge the title as taken from Genesis: “The Lord planted a garden . . . in Eden; and there He placed the man whom he had formed . . . The Lord caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life . . . and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden” (Genesis 2:8-10). In the Bible, after Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God “drove [them] out,” blocking their “way to the tree of life” (Gen. 2:24). That Malick titles a spiritual movie based on the tree man was banned from portrays his interpretation that even though Adam and Eve were banned from the Garden of Eden, the river that “flowed out of Eden to water the garden,” was still accessible to humans. This could suggest that while the river waters the tree of life, an eternity of sorts is accessible to humans who use the same water. Water is a source that symbolizes birth, life and purity: “Water is the central source of our beings. It is part of every cell and fiber in us; it is our very essence. Could water be the common denominator that weaves us all (earth, animal, human, and plant) together as one?” (Desy).

While *The Thin Red Line*’s title has no place in the Bible like *The Tree of Life* title does, *The Thin Red Line* has a definite indication of nature, specifically land surrounded by water: “For Malick the phrase has deeper resonances. To him, the thin red line is ultimately the limit of the world” (Sterritt). In a book about various representations, the author, Louis Marin, significantly mentions “the limit of the world” in one chapter, which discusses islands within a utopian discourse:

Between the Ocean, which is the limit of the unknown and the impassable, and the continent, which is equated with the known world and with civilization, there are mediating lands known as islands, which belong to both, geographically, psychologically, and perhaps metaphysically. In way, they are at the limit of the world, neither beyond it nor within it. (99).

Sterritt's correlation of Malick's movie title, *The Thin Red Line*, with "the limit of the world," which is interpreted as islands, a place between land and ocean, suggests the idea that "the thin red line" is the line between the connection of human and nature. It is also necessary to mention that *The Thin Red Line* takes place at the Guadalcanal Province in the Solomon Islands, surrounded by water. Terrence Malick subtly represents humans' location in nature in both films with a powerful philosophy behind his use of water.

Malick significantly presents a water-dwelling reptile in his opening shot of *The Thin Red Line* as its body slowly ambles into an algae-filled river; this river lacks a flow and spirit: "the natural world has come to portend spiritual lack and, with it, spiritual danger" (Barnett), quite opposite of our introduction of Private Witt. The first voice we hear in *The Thin Red Line* is an unknown voice-over: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature violate itself? Is there an avenging power to nature? Not one power, but two?" While the viewer hears these questions, we see shots of nature in the interior jungle and then we are on a beach. Malick significantly places the question, "Is there an avenging power to nature? Not one power, but two?" immediately before he displays villagers on a beach, near the ocean. This suggests the second power previously mentioned as either a correlation with the ocean or, rather, water in general as an "avenging power" or force. Soon we are in the ocean with the villagers, watching them swim and then the camera fades to a white man, whom we later learn to be Private Witt, canoeing near the village. Malick shows Witt observing a mother and her son while simultaneously Witt presents a voice-over of his mother's death. At one point, the Melanesian mother is washing her child in a river while his voice-over questions "immortality": "what is distinctive about the character of Witt is that at the core of his sense of mortality lies the metaphysical question of immortality" (Critchley). As the viewers learn of Witt's mother "goin' back to God," we understand his question of immortality, although the viewer has already seen his spirit in and around the ocean. It is fitting that Malick places a calming view of the ocean when Witt goes on to say: "I wondered how it'd be when I died." This voice-over combined with a shot of the ocean foreshadows Witt's death and how his spirit will be reborn through nature, through his water guide to "immortality." This entire introduction of Witt subtly displays his spirit, which is appropriately encompassed by water.

While Malick's introduction of *The Tree of Life* audibly cites the thoughts of Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain) on Nature vs. Grace, his affinity for an element such as water in filming doesn't necessarily *distinguish* Nature or Grace; it simply elucidates a spirit that guides to an eternity. The first time we see water noticeably in *The Tree of Life* is when Mrs. O'Brien says, "No one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end," while at the same time we see the middle son, R. L. (Laramie Eppler), wandering almost sadly. Then immediately we are taken to a waterfall that looks forceful and brutal. Malick's sequence here suggests death is already present (Hellmann). Mrs. O'Brien describes two paths "the nuns taught" her she *must* choose and it is clear she has chosen the path of Grace: "I will be true to You. Whatever comes." Just before this, as we see the waterfall, it could suggest that through God, Mrs. O'Brien imagines her son's death like a waterfall: it is forceful and brutal, yet his life has been cleansed and he has possibly been reborn. About eight minutes after this stream of consciousness sequence, we are taken to present time where we see older Jack (Sean Penn) wandering in what appears to be a desert. The camera immediately cuts to him lying in bed with another woman and soon he goes to the bathroom, slowly putting his hands under water. From Malick's cuts to Jack's present life, there is no doubt it is distant, bare, sterile and sharp edged; his house and his relationship with the woman lacks spirit, which is why Malick directed Penn to slowly, almost hesitantly, put his hands into the water from the faucet. We then hear Jack's voice-over saying, "I see my brother. True," while we see a flashback of R. L. standing in the rain. The fact that Malick cuts to R. L. standing in the rain at the same time Jack thinks of R. L. as "true" reemphasizes the idea that water symbolizes purity and it displays true spirit that will guide R. L. and eventually Jack to an eternity.

While Malick repeatedly displays his characters as spiritual in correlation with water, he contemplates through the same characters within a different world. After our introduction to Witt in *Thin*, we see him become fearful when noticing an American ship approaching the island. Within less than a minute, Malick leads us to a man (also played by Sean Penn) in a dark room saying Witt hasn't "changed at all," he hasn't "learned a thing." It is at this moment the audience learns Private Witt was in fact AWOL, thus being his reason for location in the Melanesian village. With the acknowledgment of Witt's being AWOL, it is

necessary to reiterate his spirit as seen thus far, away from army life. In the conversation between Private Witt and Sergeant Welsh, “the question at issue is metaphysical truth; or, more precisely, whether there is such a thing as metaphysical truth. Baldly stated: is this the only world, or is there another world?” (Critchley). According to Welsh, “a man himself is nothing... and there ain’t no world but this one.” This conversation relates to Malick’s use of water surrounding Witt because his response (“You’re wrong there, top. I’ve seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.”) reiterates Witt’s spirit he felt in the Melanesian village, surrounded by water. One author significantly remarks: “Witt’s ‘other world’ is not a private realm that he aesthetically created to guard against world collapse. Rather, it is the pre-individuated and destratified firmament of our material existence in which all things and beings are connected” (Baldo). This sense of “another world” is familiar to Jack in *Tree* as we follow him through his morning at work: the camera follows him through a sterile building, often looking outside the glass windows, with inserts of people on a beach in the ocean. This insert strongly emphasizes a freedom and spirituality Jack desires and knows is present somewhere, but where? As Jack observes life outside his work windows, mentally he is becoming aware of the claustrophobia he is experiencing: “I don’t understand anything. I just feel like I’m bumping into walls,” he says to someone over the phone. Immediately, Malick cuts to a close-up of a flowing stream, cuts to Jack sitting in a chair at work reminiscing, and cuts again to children running and splashing in the stream we just saw. This stream of consciousness Malick presents clearly familiarizes Jack with a spirituality he’s once known. Shortly after these moments, the camera is following Jack again, lingering on a newly planted tree outside of his building, while simultaneously his voice-over says, “How did I lose you?” This unnatural tree, physically placed in the city, is bare; it lacks life, as Jack seems to lack a part of his life. During the same voice-over, Malick cuts to a forceful underwater shot of an ocean wave as Jack continues, “Wandered. Forgot you.” From here, we are then taken away from the city and watching Jack rinse his face in a desert from an insufficient puddle of water. For a moment he observes his reflection in the water and then we follow him as he wanders through a barren wilderness. Jack’s journey in this wilderness indicates his search for water, for life, for spirituality he wants to reclaim. This is

reiterated when Jack is back in his work building, wandering, thinking of the spirit he lacks, wanting to find the place his dead brother resides: “Find me,” R. L.’s voice-over requests. Within five minutes of each of Malick’s films, he presents two worlds that represent happier lives for each of his characters, Jack and Witt; these introductions set the course for each man as they continue their journey in each film through a water guide to eternity.

Malick emphatically manifests a distinct path for Jack in *The Tree of Life* and for Witt in *The Thin Red Line*; Jack’s is provided for him before birth and Witt’s is set after his return from being AWOL. After Malick’s glorious creation sequence and before the birth of Jack, there is a moment when Mrs. O’Brien’s voice-over calls for her unborn child: “Light of my life, I search for you, my hope, my child,” and Malick lingers on a calm stream as he nears the end of the creation sequence. His purpose in doing so is to insinuate that Mrs. O’Brien’s children have a spiritual path set for them, even before their conception, as essentially any child might within the universe, which is why Malick chose to display the end of her voice-over, “my child,” with a view from space. He immediately cuts to a mighty underwater wave and then to a beach as Malick then provides Jack’s voice-over: “*You spoke to me. Through her you spoke to me, from the sky, the trees*” – Jack is seen struggling through a rocky landscape – “*Before I knew, I loved you, believed in you.*” This voice-over, which leads into Mrs. O’Brien’s pregnancy with Jack, confirms Jack’s recognition of his preset path of spirituality. Mrs. O’Brien’s pregnancy is shown almost entirely as a young boy standing in a white jumper, near a river, with a female figure, also in white, seemingly guiding the boy to his next destination. After this, Malick takes us to an underwater bedroom, where we see the same little boy swimming towards a light: Mrs. O’Brien is giving birth to Jack. All of these moments before Jack’s birth indicate the path of spirituality Jack is born with: “*It is as if the son was somewhere else – in a parallel universe, a spiritual realm*” (Garrett). While it might be possible that Witt is born with a similar spirituality in *The Thin Red Line*, his spirit seems lost and eventually regained during his time in the Melanesian village. Baldo enlightens the idea that Witt, after his return to the army from being AWOL, carries that spirit with him and diffuses it to others:

Witt’s relationship to life and those around him is radically transformed. He glides like a benevolent ghost through the war . . . Although there is an obvious element of idealization in the notions of ‘all things shining’ and ‘the glory’, they are equally

reflective of a heightened affective and spiritual connection with nature that affirms 'the Whole' (i.e. the connectedness of all things) and the ineluctable power of existence.

This "Whole" Baldo refers to is acknowledged by Witt in a voice-over as he walks among wounded American soldiers at camp: "Maybe all men got one big soul, and everybody's a part of it—all faces of the same man, one big self." It is within these moments we see Witt kneel down and comfort a wounded soldier and rub water on the soldier's head. The correlation between Witt's thought, "one big self," and his use of water to cleanse the soldier, implies purification, a sort of baptism. In each path Malick sets in *Tree* and *Thin*, he perhaps acknowledges Emerson's "The Over-soul": "within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One." Through the water guide Malick provides, "the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related," is expressed through childbirth and through a general cleansing by any source of water, provided to all humans, suggesting an opportunity of eternity for all.

In moments experienced both during Jack's childhood and during Witt's journey through Guadalcanal, Malick creates events that cause each man to "run dry" of their spirit. Jack's childhood, shown in a stream of consciousness and rapid-montage, represents a different path, as provided by his father, than he was born with: "disparate family and childhood scenes are part of the drama of the film and create a backlog of memory, a form of consciousness, for the film viewer. The particularities of the individual mind are shared; and Jack's spiritual arguments become part of our consideration" (Garrett). As his mother is seen almost always in blue, symbolic of water and spirit, his father remains a disciplinarian instructing ideas such as: "Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce and will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you." Just before this voice-over, Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt) is seen hosing his sons outside, significantly suggesting a subtle spirit in him even as they are all laughing and experiencing fun and freedom in the water. These sparse spiritual moments with Mr. O'Brien are enough to deteriorate Jack's spirit, especially since Jack is "more like [him] than [his mother]." Continuous with Jack's spiritual

deterioration is the moment when a boy at the local swimming pool drowns while Jack is swimming with his brothers and friends. There are only a few moments when Jack has an opportunity to regain his spirit and freedom during his childhood before his spirit is completely lost; one being when his father is gone on a business trip and Jack is seen in one scene relaxing on a blue blanket, by the river with his mother, as her voice-over says, “Forgive.” Jack takes advantage of his freedom while his father is gone and at one point becomes aware of the spirituality he has lost: the camera looms under water while Jack swims with his brothers and his voice-over questions, “How do I get back where they are?” As Malick’s viewers witness Jack’s arduous childhood moments, it is no question his adult life has become dry and sterile, starting in his late childhood: “What was it you showed me? I didn’t know how to name you then,” says young Jack’s voice-over with a beautiful sunset picture, relaxing on a calm river. Private Witt confronts similar moments in *Thin*, especially in his conversations with Sergeant Welsh: “There’s nothing you can do for anybody else . . . If you die, it’s going to be for nothing. There’s not some other world out there where everything’s going to be okay. It’s just this one.” This exact moment is dusk, and amid Welsh’s discouragement, Private Witt’s view is stunning with greens and blues dominating across his face. The combination of Witt’s confident smirk, the blue reflection on his skin, and his final look up to the sky before the end of the scene suggest that his spirit is still present, despite Welsh’s thoughts about Witt’s “other world.” Witt encounters a brief moment when he seems to be lost as the men wash in a stream; all the while he is having a flashback of his time with the natives. His flashbacks are compelling with effectual water – a native under a waterfall, a cascading waterfall over rocks as the camera floats down to Witt under the waterfall, smiling, Witt in the village while children play near the ocean and men canoe in the ocean – and then Witt is back at the desolate stream, while men wash their faces and fill their canteens and Witt simply lets the water flow through the palms of his hands. In this moment, it seems that Witt is trying to grasp his spirit that is almost lost yet again. While Malick previously set a high standard of importance in each film to Jack and Witt in regards to water and their spirituality, he uses the same source to take them slightly off course.

As Malick has now seemingly set spiritual courses for both Jack in *Tree* and Private

Witt in *Thin* and then challenged each of them with a relative loss of spirit and sense of dryness, he provides impacting water scenes in the remainder of each film to guide the men back to their own spirituality. When it seems that Witt's spirituality is nearly lost after his return to the Melanesian village – a child will not approach him, villagers are fighting, disease is present, voice-over saying: “They were a family . . . How did we lose the good that was given us? Let it slip away, scattered, careless” – he makes a return to the soldier camp and finds a change. The men appear calm, as they relax and play cards, seeming familial. Shortly after this reassuring moment among his own men, Witt's final moments take place in *The Thin Red Line*. Everything before his death in the field is in and around a river where the American and Japanese soldiers are slowly approaching each other. He volunteers to trek ahead through the river because he wants “to be there in case something bad happens.” As he seems to have passed his spirit to his men, he feels it is now his duty to sacrifice his life, extending his spirit to nature. As the Japanese soldiers pursue him, he reaches a clearing in the jungle and it is here he becomes lost in thought, almost in a reverie, as he raises his gun and is shot several times. Immediately Malick cuts to rays of light shining through the trees and then to Witt swimming with the native children. His water guide has ultimately led him to his eternity through nature. He is laid to rest beneath a huge tree, which possibly simulates a tree of life in *his* Garden of Eden. Welsh says to Witt's grave, “where's your spark now?” But this is Witt's spark; this is Witt's destiny, his answer about immortality, as his body lies underground, beside the river, revealing his true spirit.

As Private Witt undergoes a sort of rebirth through nature in his death in *The Tree of Life*, Jack experiences a rebirth at the end of *The Tree of Life* once he finally passes through the barren landscape and reaches the beach. After Malick's poetic sequences of Jack's childhood, he takes us back to Jack's present workday, still inserting glimpses of Jack in a desert-like atmosphere. As Jack walks through a door in this barren landscape, Jack's voice-over requests: “Keep us. Guide us... to the end of time.” Shortly after this, we hear R. L.'s voice again: “Follow me,” and then the female spiritual guide in white from Jack's pre-birth is guiding him. It is then that adult Jack reaches young Jack, who guides adult Jack directly to the beach he has been searching for. Adult Jack is now walking on the beach freely, kneeling

in gratefulness for his spirituality he has finally regained: “Jack soon reunites with his family. It is an event of consolation and joy. In the background, the water glimmers in the sunlight” (Barnett). The water in this entire poetic sequence is astounding as waves roll over each other one after another and Malick cuts to an insert of cascading water. At one point, Malick takes a lingering moment to follow a mask as it sinks lower into an ocean; this mask suggests adult Jack’s mask of his present life, which he will leave behind to start fresh. He has been reborn and he and his family can comfortably send his brother’s life along to an eternity on the beach, where Jack’s spirituality was returned to him.

The final scenes in each film bear much importance in regards to water as a spiritual guide to eternity, as each of them represents a strand of each movie in one picture: the life cycle. With Witt’s death in *The Thin Red Line*, there comes new life: “a small clump of soil, or perhaps a broken coconut shell, in a pool of calm water, holding a stalk of new life that reaches toward the sky with its shoots and toward the earth in its shimmering reflection” (Sterritt). This new life is “An intimation of immortality in a world inundated with death” (Sterritt), “it signifies unceasing life in the light of mortality” as the “water gives life” (Morrison). Although Jack has not physically died, but rather experienced “rebirth” in *The Tree of Life*, the choice of “immortality” is provided for him with the site of a bridge, one of the final cuts in the film. This bridge over water signifies his new choice of Nature and Grace, providing an opportunity for Jack to maintain his regained spiritualism. Provided that he crosses, the bridge shall lead him to an eternity. The very final view of the creator found throughout the movie reiterates the life cycle, in that through either Nature or Grace, humans have the opportunity to an eternal life. Terrence Malick quite successfully conveys this concept of eternity through spirituality by water in both *The Tree of Life* and the *The Thin Red Line*. In his stunning use of the prayer-like voice-over, his interpretation of characters’ minds through stream of consciousness filming, and his beautifully impacting shots of nature, Malick guides his viewers through paths of loss and gain, as he poetically manifests the spirituality sought by his characters and ultimately lures them, viewers and characters, to an eternal source.

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